Superheroes: The Endgame

Review of Superhero Movies

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Abstract

Comic book movies can't decide whether superheroes are human or posthuman, but either way they have reached a dead end.

For years we've been throwing our box office dollars at beefy men in tights (aka superheroes) who promise to protect us from a laundry list of dangers after the imbecile authorities have failed yet again to do so. And it's not only the cops and politicians who are largely absent from the comic book blockbusters, or, if present, they are part of the problem, but it's us, humans, who just aren't up to doing the job themselves. And now we see that the superheroes don't seem to be much good at it either. In the Russo brothers' *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), they allow melancholy Thanos, the big, bad ender-of-worlds in the two most recent Avenger movies, to turn them and half of humanity into ash by snapping his fingers. It takes them five and a half hours spread over two movies, not to mention the waste of a considerable amount of acting talent, to repair the damage. What is it with these costumed freaks? The problem seems to be that they are, when all is said and done, too much like us, too human.

This was never the case in the past, when Superman and Batman dispatched our enemies with ease. The splashy costumes they favored worked to emphasize the differences that distinguish them from mere mortals. Reflecting on his outfit in one of the *Dark Knight* movies, Batman says, "A man, however strong, however skilled, is just flesh and blood. I need to

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be more than a man. I need to be a symbol."[1] As he puts it, by transforming himself into a symbol, he dehumanizes himself.

Discarding the human, and favored with extraordinary powers, superheroes are by definition *posthuman*. (In *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* [2016], they're called "metahumans" and elsewhere "transhumans.") Posthuman, an imprecise, omnibus term that describes real-world human upgrades facilitated by advances in AI, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and prosthetics along with, in the unreal world of these narratives, a grab bag of transformations caused by encounters with aliens, radiation, and so on.

Posthumanism has been theorized in many ways, but generally speaking, it is a species of *antihumanism*. One thread that runs through its iterations is that of *decentering* humans, elbowing them out of their place at the center of the universe where humanism had placed them, discarding the notion of human autonomy and exceptionalism, and reembedding them in the social and/or evolutionary pudding from which they emerged. Posthumanists would probably agree with Stephen Hawking's famous characterization of his species, when he called it "an advanced breed of monkeys on a minor planet of a very average star."[2]

Thus minimized, humans have nearly disappeared from the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe). The few who appear are usually those useless authority figures, the senators, generals, and presidents. With few exceptions, every one of them is small-minded, stupid, and/or corrupt. In most of these shows, our superheroes are at war with external enemies, aliens of one sort or another, but in a real sense, they're just a pretext. The real enemies are at home, in our government and among our "friends." In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), they want to send Black Widow to

1. *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2005).
2. Jane Onyanga-Omara, "Stephen Hawking's Memorable Quotes: 'We Are Just an Advanced Breed of Monkeys,'" USA Today, March 14, 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/03/14/stephen-hawking-quotations/423145002/.

prison for dumping compromising files onto the Internet, Snowden-style, and the movie sides with her, not them. In *Iron Man 2* (2010), actor Garry Shandling's generic senator tries to claim Tony Stark's Iron Man super suit for the US government. Tony refuses, and the movie sides with him, not the government.

Samuel L. Jackson, who is (or was) a bigger star than most of the interchangeable ingénues of both genders behind those kitschy masks and hoods, plays Nick Fury, a mere mortal at one time and a mainstay of the MCU, but he's largely disappeared from the movies. Jackson's problem isn't that he's black—there are plenty of people of color in these films—it's that he's human and has therefore been marginalized. Explaining his absence from *Avengers*: *Age of Ultron* (2013), Jackson observed, "It's another one of those 'people who have powers fighting people who have powers' [movies]. . . . There's not a lot I could do except shoot a gun,"[3] and guns, by this time, are little better than tomahawks or slingshots. The same holds true for *Captain America: Civil War*. In *Infinity War*, the darkest-before-the-dawn first installment of the recent two-parter, Fury has a cameo in the obligatory buried-in-the-credits Easter egg, but no sooner does he appear than he disappears, turned to ash by the Thanos before he can even finish a phone call.

Absent in *Infinity War* and *Endgame* is the issue of collateral damage that preoccupied the two films, *Civil War* and *Ultron*, that preceded them. Concern for the welfare of the human bystanders who were casualties of the conflicts that consume these shows became irrelevant when there are virtually no bystanders—that is, humans, in either of the latter. Like our superheroes, they're presumably turned to ash, but we rarely see it. Moreover, it's the remnant of humanity in superheroes that gets them into trouble.

3. Graeme McMillan, "Samuel L. Jackson on 'Avengers: Age of Ultron' Role: 'I'm Not Doing So Much,'" Hollywood Reporter, March 26, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/samuel-l-jackson-avengers-age-691388/

Superheroes have always shown emotions, however attenuated, but now, when they express their feelings, it's their undoing, like Dr. Strange who has to hand over the Time Stone to Thanos to save Tony's life. Scarlet Witch refuses to deny Thanos the Mind Stone by destroying it, because it's embedded in Vision's forehead. Thanos, unimpeded by human emotion, gets it anyway, by tearing it out of his head, and in the process kills Vision.

It is precisely Thanos's inability to experience emotion that gives him the advantage over the Avengers. He professes to feel for his daughter Gamora, but he hurls her to her death anyway, so he can secure the Soul Stone, the last of the six stones that will give him infinite power. Before she disappears into the void, she tells him that he "loves no one," and she's right, sort of. It's not Gamora he loves but himself. As he puts it, "I ignored my destiny once. I cannot do that again." We know from *Game of Thrones* that destiny lovers are tyrants waiting to happen.

The triangular relationship between Clark Kent, Lois Lane, and Superman varies from film to film depending on who's writing, directing, and producing, but initially, at any rate, Clark loves Lois who loves Superman; its only human Lois and faux-human Clark who are allowed feelings. When Superman finally comes around and decides to marry her, he has to shed his super powers. Later, Lois becomes his Achilles heel, used against him by Lex Luthor, just as Thanos manipulates the Avengers into giving up the stones by threatening their friends and loved ones.

Secret identities like Clark Kent were the last outposts of the human in these stories, but with the exception of Peter Parker (aka Spider-Man), most of Marvel's superheroes have lost interest in them, another indication of the marginalization of humans. First to go was the "secret." Today's superheroes, Marvel's in particular, are well out of the closet. No more darting into phone booths for a quick costume change. (No more phone booths!) Everybody knows that Iron Man is Tony Stark, that Captain America is Steve Rogers, and DC's Wonder Woman is Diana Prince. The secret identities of some superheroes, like Thor, have disappeared into the mists of time. They no longer need to fly false flags and elude their human

charades in order to come into their own, because they no longer yearn to live "normal" lives. Their superhero identities have cannibalized their workaday human identities.

The original rationales for secret identities—protecting loved ones from bad guys and the superheroes themselves from the cops who don't take kindly to DIY justice—have evaporated, perhaps as a result of the decay of the rule of law and the consequent relaxation of the taboo against vigilantism.

To some extent, the characters in the most recent Avengers movies face the same problem as the characters in *Game of Thrones*: What is the best way to organize human society so that it will survive? It's a political problem, and both shows, despite the royals in *Game of Thrones* and the superheroes in the Avengers films, unsurprisingly come down on the side of democracy as opposed to tyranny. They endorse inclusion and consensus rather than exclusion and coercion. In *Game of Thrones*, the characters need to put aside the dynastic feuds with which they amuse themselves in favor of alliances that will enable them to defeat the army of the undead White Walkers. As Jon Snow tells Queen Cersei, trying to persuade her to join his coalition of the flesh and blood, "This isn't about noble houses, this is about the living and the dead." Likewise, in *Infinity War*, when Tony tells Bruce Banner that he can't enlist Cap in the struggle against Thanos because they're not on speaking terms, Bruce retorts, "Thanos is coming. It doesn't matter who you're talking to or not."[4] On the other hand, it doesn't matter whether the superheroes fight Thanos individually or in groups. They lose either way.

Superhero movies, on the whole, are darker than *Game of Thrones*. The message of the HBO series, "Win together, lose alone," is lost in the mayhem. In the Avengers and X-Men franchises, the issue is not so much political as ontological. *Game of Thrones* may ask the question, Of what sort of stuff is society made? The superhero movies, on the other hand, ask, Of

4. *Avengers: Infinity War*, directed by Anthony and Joe Russo (New York: Marvel Studios, April 23, 2018).

what sort of stuff are humans made? In *X-Men: First Class* (2011), standing on a beach facing US and Soviet warships in the film's version of the Cuban Missile Crisis, mutant Erik/Magneto gets to the heart of the matter when he observes that the hostile forces arrayed against them, albeit themselves mortal enemies, are basically identical: "humans."[5]

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Where does this jaundiced view of human nature come from? Its roots can be traced back to the origins of both Marvel and DC Comics in the run-up to World War II. Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* #1, published in 1938. With Germany on the march across Europe, the United States was still officially neutral when, on December 20, 1940, almost a full year before Pearl Harbor, Captain America appeared on the cover of Timely Comics, which eventually evolved into Marvel, socking Hitler in the jaw. He represented writer Joe Simon's and artist Jack Kirby's contribution to the propaganda effort on behalf of America's entry into the war.

Marvel never outgrew its antifascist antecedents. World War II has always served as something of a touchstone for its family of superheroes. Two X-Men movies open in Nazi death camps, and as the MCU expands, we see that all those vile authority figures are actually Nazis, agents of Hydra, a secret society organized by the Waffen SS just prior to World War II, that has managed to penetrate every nook and cranny of America's government.

Marvel's long, albeit waning obsession, with Hitler, combined with concern that posthumans may turn against us, eventually undermines its attempts to achieve the posthuman. The kind of dehumanization of superheroes expressed by Batman is equated with fascism. In *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), it's Herr Schmidt, speaking for the rest of the Nazi *ubermenschen*, who tells Cap, "I am proud to say that we have left humanity behind."[6]

5. *X-Men: First Class*, directed by Matthew Vaughn (New York: Marvel Entertainment, May 25, 2011).
6. *Captain America: The First Avenger*, directed by Joe Johnston (New York: Marvel Studios, 2011).

Once superheroes succeed in breaking free from the human, most of them shrink from the result and make their way back to it, as if its pull is so strong they can't escape it. When the posthumans in these shows look into the mirror, they don't like what they see. The truth is that the best superheroes are the least super, and the best posthumans are the least post—and the most human. The failure of these shows and movies to dramatize the posthuman suggests that despite their insistence that humanism is bankrupt, they are unable to move beyond it. There is no way out. They're trapped. The desire to break with the human has so far outpaced the ability of humans to imagine what a posthuman future might be like or what kind of creatures posthumans might be. No matter how much people long to escape the constraints of the human, they fall back to Earth. Which is one of the reasons the original *Planet of the Apes*, released in 1968, is one of the most prescient movies ever made.

The rehumanization of superheroes began in earnest with Peter Parker in 1962, when Marvel writer and editor Stan Lee decided they should be more relatable. He wanted the young Spider-Man to suffer from adolescent anxieties: acne, insecurity, girl trouble, and so on. He recalled, "My publisher said, in his ultimate wisdom, 'Stan, that is the worst idea I have ever heard. . . . He can't have personal problems if he's supposed to be a superhero—don't you know who a superhero is?' " The rest, as they say, is history. Not only did Peter Parker come into his own, but *Superman* spun off the TV series, *Smallville*, that ran for a decade (2001–11) and chronicled the adventures of a teenage Clark Kent. Fox launched its Batman origins series, *Gotham*, which dramatizes the lives of the youthful Bruce Wayne and his young-adult super villains.

Marvel's humanization of superheroes has gone so far that the Avengers are portrayed as a quarrelsome, jealous, and petty bunch who spend more time squabbling among themselves than they do battling their enemies, a side effect, no doubt, of the steroid smoothies they've been drinking and the testosterone patches hidden beneath their spandex suits. They have to be constantly reminded that they are in fact on the same side.

Tony Stark had been dipping his iron toes into the tepid waters of the mainstream for some time. He is torn between human and superhuman, confused about who and what he is. And like Spider-Man, he is a first-class neurotic. Indeed, director Jon Favreau explained that he wanted to make Iron Man vulnerable—that is, more human. In an early script draft of *Iron Man 3*, Tony even confides to his girl Friday and eventual partner, Pepper Potts, that ever since the Chitauri had their way with Grand Central Station in the original *Avengers* (2012), he has felt vulnerable, and he actually starts to weep, behavior so unbecoming a superhero that the scene was wisely omitted from the movie. Still, he may not have needed a Kleenex, but he does need a therapist. He suffers from anxiety attacks. Anxiety attacks? The series also features homelessness and even alcoholism—alluding to Robert Downey Jr.'s then personal problems.

Whereas Tony once considered the Iron Man suit—that is, his superhero, posthuman alter ego—an asset, he now experiences it as a liability, a prison, even an adversary. Instead of clumsily climbing into it, as he once did, he devises a way of summoning the suit to him from afar. It soars through the air in pieces—a gauntlet here, a breastplate there—assembling itself around his body. Well enough and good, but just as often the pieces bang into him or, worse, refuse to coalesce and therefore fail him entirely. With an outfit like that, it's no wonder he spends most of *Iron Man 3* as Tony—minus his suit and superpowers. In *Civil War*, Tony doesn't become Iron Man until two-thirds of the way through, and then he's often without his helmet, reminding us that for all Iron Man's superpowers he is, as Tony once put it, no more than a "man in a can."

Tony's flop sweats are by no means unique. By the time *Logan* was released in 2017, four years after *Wolverine*, the X-Men, including the lupine superhero played by Hugh Jackman, are in decline. The one super villain that can't be denied is time, although our friends do manage to pull off a "time heist" in *Endgame*. As Logan puts it, "Nature made me a freak. Man made me a weapon. And God made it last too long. The world is not the

same as it was. Mutants . . . they're gone now."[7] Shaggy, scarred, and haggard, he looks half dead and actually dies at the end, mourning the human feelings that he long ago sacrificed for his superpowers.

Logan has plenty of company. In *Infinity War*, the entire MCU implodes. Twelve superheroes, including Black Panther, Spidey, and Doctor Strange, apparently breathe their last, as well as Loki who dies for the third time, all victims of Thanos. We won't forget the day that the invulnerable became vulnerable, just like humans. Thanks to quantum physics and especially multiverses that go all the way back to 1944's Mister Mxyzptik, a *Superman* character apparently from the fifth dimension, none of the Marvel superheroes, including those in the recent streaming hit *WandaVision*, really die; they all come back in one way or another. Kellyanne Conway, with her "alternative facts," was clearly a comic book fan.

True, Thanos seems to be culling the first-generation Avengers, preparing the way for a new crop coming up behind them, but who knew superheroes grew old and died or were just conveniently whisked off-stage when their contracts expired.

Even Batman has had enough. He may once have wanted to hollow himself of human emotion so that he might became a symbol, but by the time of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), he is so eager to get out of those spandex tights that he fakes his own death so that Bruce Wayne can sip cappuccinos at a sidewalk cafe in Florence with Catwoman, Selina Kyle, like a normal person—that is, a human. Can marriage and family be far off? In *Endgame*, Cap is sent back in time to the 1950s, settles down with Peggy Carter, and stays there. Black Widow sacrifices herself so Hawkeye can seize the Soul Stone and his family, dissolved by Thanos, can be restored to him. Could it be that all that sturm und drang was just about restoring family? We learned from *Game of Thrones* that family is a double-edged sword, at

7. *Avengers Endgame*, directed by Anthony and Joe Russo (New York: Marvel Studios, 2019).

the heart of the conflicts that rend the Seven Kingdoms. Loyalty to family is overrated. Maybe the Russos weren't watching.

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Not only do individual posthuman heroes drift back to the human, but humanity itself, after being savaged in show after show, movie after movie, makes a comeback. Pace Erik/Magneto and his ilk, it's not a cesspool of depravity after all. We come to suspect that its tawdry reputation is unfounded because the accusations against it are put in the mouths of villains. In *Wonder Woman*, it's Ares who tries to convince the Amazonian warrior to join him in exterminating humans because "they are ugly, filled with hatred, weak."[8] Ares, however, is a bad guy, the god of war, so we can discount his words. On the contrary, humanity needs to be saved.

Thanos is just one more in a long line of super villains who refuses to rehumanize dehumanized humanity. He's another version of Ultron, an AI created by Tony Stark to protect humanity from any and all threats. Ultron concludes, however, that humans themselves are the biggest danger to humanity and decides to exterminate them. Using similar logic, Thanos, cloaked with the mantle of an eco-warrior, says, "This universe is finite. Its resources are finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist." He goes on, "It needs correction . . . but random, dispassionate, fair to rich and poor alike. . . . I call that mercy."

There's a Green Lantern comic in which a young woman is killed and crammed into a refrigerator. Comics writer Gail Simone coined the term "fridging" to refer to a common trope where women are harmed for the express purpose of motivating men to take action. If "humans" are substituted for "women," we have a key to unlocking *Endgame*.

Thanos's eco-argument may be no more than a rationalization for bad behavior, but he has a point. As the reality of human-caused climate change—extreme weather, rising seas, and the extinction of countless animal and plant species—becomes inarguable, we have come to understand

8. Wonder Woman, directed by Patty Jenkins (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 2017).

that humans *are* the biggest threat to humanity and our planet. For all that the MCU nods in the direction of racial and gender equality, *Endgame* locks humans in a refrigerator, as it were, to motivate the Avengers to get off their butts for round two against Thanos. Antman and Hawkeye rouse the far-flung superheroes who are feeling sorry for themselves, indulging the senses, or lolling about in domestic bliss, to do what they're supposed to be good at: avenging. This is all well and good, but by casting Thanos as an eco-warrior and then shrugging off his argument, *Endgame* implicitly sides with the climate-change deniers. Watching Marvel's two-parter, it would be easy to conclude that those who concern themselves with the health of our planet must be fought tooth and nail. The effect of humanizing superheroes, abandoning posthumanism, and sentimentalizing the family is paradoxically to move a historically left-leaning franchise to the right.

Black Widow, one of the latest off the Marvel assembly line, jumping back in time, sentimentalizes the family as well, at first by negation—the family Natasha Romanoff and her sister Yelena Belova thought they had but didn't. Initially, the picture seems like it could have been directed by Paige Jennings, the daughter who breaks with the family in *The Americans*, until Romanoff realizes that her real family is the Avengers. Little does she know what lies in wait.